

OXFORD

MAGAZINE

No. 435 Noughth Week Michaelmas Term 2021

In normal times, in this first *Magazine* issue of the new academic year, we would be celebrating the University's continuing top rating in the annual *THE* World University Rankings and we would be looking forward to the Vice-Chancellor's Annual Oration, hoping but hardly expecting that she will address the problem – one that existed long before Covid-19 – of a moribund dysfunctional Congregation. But normal times are no more and, as we see it, there is one overriding reality that all in the University need to focus on from this point on.

Normality has not just been cancelled by the ravages of Covid-19, but at the same time by the retreat from Afghanistan with all its fundamental implications for the future world order, a retreat that reminded us of the trauma of 9/11 and the c3000 lives lost. Covid-19 has already taken many million of lives worldwide so the murders of a record 227 environmental activists across the world over the last year (as reported by *Global Witness*) could easily be missed. Numerically the sacrifices of those few in the cause of raising awareness of climate change is nothing compared to those humans and animals already lost to air pollution, wild fires, drought, flooding, hurricanes,

ENDS AND MEANS

starvation and armed conflicts caused by climate change. It is estimated that over one billion wild animals died in the wild fires in Australia in 2019. With numbers like these it becomes difficult indeed to know how to react proportionately.

Why is this the theme of our editorial at the start of the new term? Oxford is in a privileged position – with its attendant responsibilities in terms of influencing public attitudes and setting standards of evidence and argument – and all the more so as a result of its prominent role in the medi-

cal and scientific solutions that are successfully reducing the impact of Covid-19. Now that climate change is ever more clearly accepted as an even greater threat to humanity Oxford should have a similar part to play. Many Oxford academics are already involved as key experts in the preparation for the crucially important COP26 meeting in November in Glasgow. Our students have been instrumental in pushing the University, reluctantly and incompletely, to divest from coal and oil. Belatedly, from last term, the University has adopted a grandiose sustainability policy, yet to prove itself.

But, at a time when Extinction Rebellion protests on

Oxford Magazine publication arrangements

We are unable to publish the *Oxford Magazine* in print for the foreseeable future, as a result of COVID19-related working restrictions. Arrangements for archival copies will be made at a later date.

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...and much more

London streets have been raising awareness, it is important to ask whether we in Oxford have done enough. Scientific expertise is essential and it is what the University is good at, but one wonders how many of those of our specialist colleagues who see better than any of us the existential threat that climate change poses have risked harm or arrest in the same ways as XR activists.

What can we do as individual citizen members of society at large when the challenge is so global in scale? Not that much unless we work together. Nonetheless, all in the University bear a certain extra responsibility because we are privileged by access to information and are better able to tell truth from fake news, judging conspiracy theories for what they are while respecting what only experts can offer. Above all we have a duty to understand the scale of the problem and to speak out.

"If emissions follow the trajectory set by current NDCs [Nationally Determined Contributions], there is a less than 5 per cent chance of keeping temperatures well below 2°C relative to pre-industrial levels, and less than 1 per cent chance of reaching the 1.5°C Paris Agreement target. ...If emissions do not come down drastically before 2030, then by 2040 some 3.9 billion people [i.e. one half of the world population] are likely to experience major heatwaves, 12 times more than the historic average. By the 2030s, 400 million people globally each year are likely to be exposed to temperatures exceeding the workability threshold. Also by the 2030s, the number of people on the planet exposed to heat stress exceeding the survivability threshold is likely to surpass 10 million a year" (Chatham House, "Climate change risk assessment 2021", September 2021)

We are not accustomed to making sense of numbers such as these or to envisaging the future they point to. The message that has to reach the public is actually simple; CO₂ output is currently increasing and even if it were soon to be reducing – as we must hope after Glasgow — CO₂ would still be accumulating in the upper atmosphere due to its long persistence, so we are already committed to accelerating effects of climate change. Inevitably polar ice will continue to melt, sea levels will continue to rise and coastal cities and populations will continue to retreat.

Out of desperation, environmental campaigners are risking more and more. As we write "Insulate Britain" continues to block the M25, their point, ironically, being reinforced by a simultaneous crisis in household gas supplies which would be avoidable if houses were properly insulated and gas boilers banned. Supply crises like this are a portent of what is to come in terms of the changes to our accustomed ways of life that we will eventually all have to make. The current panic reaction to petrol shortages is perhaps a portent of likely public responses to the oncoming sacrifices.

The M25 protestors face anger, condemnation, forceful police responses, a counter-reaction and imprisonment. But the fundamental question is whether the ends justify the means. The seven young German climate campaigners who at the same time were risking nearly four weeks of hunger strike won the governmental concession they were demanding.

B.B., T.J.H

NOTICE

The Editors of the *Oxford Magazine* regret that they cannot publish any material submitted to them anonymously. If the author requests publication on the basis that the author's name and university address be withheld from the readership, the Editors will consider the reasons given and in their discretion may publish on that basis; otherwise the material will be returned to the author.

Return to site — were we consulted?

DAVID CHIVALL

On 7th September 2020 there were 15 deaths from Covid-19 in the UK, 3,857 new cases of the disease and no vaccine had yet made it out of clinical trials. On the same day the Vice-Chancellor announced in a message to all staff that the University was moving to “Business Continuity Plan Level 2” in advance of the new academic year. This meant that while staff should continue to work from home if possible, some in-person teaching would be allowed, albeit with social distancing restrictions and mandatory face coverings. At the time there were also national restrictions on the number of people allowed to meet. Once Michaelmas Term began, cases within the University and city rapidly rose and by the end of Week 3 Oxford city had been placed by the government under “High Alert” for coronavirus.

On 6th September 2021 there were 136 deaths from the coronavirus, 44,130 new cases, and 65% of the UK population had been vaccinated against the disease. On this day the University moved to “Business Continuity Plan Level 1” in preparation for the new academic year. There is now an expectation that everyone who can will return to their offices and labs for the start of term while mitigations such as social distancing and face coverings are no longer mandatory, and there are no limits on group sizes.

The Vice-Chancellor’s announcement of the return to on-site working caused some disquiet: for many staff this was the biggest change in their working conditions since the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020. In response Oxford UCU carried out a rapid survey of our members. The survey was open for four days over the weekend of the 18th September and received 346 responses. The survey consisted of ten multiple choice questions and a free-text box for further comments.

At the time of the survey, over a third (36%) of respondents had not worked on-site during the previous six months. A further fifth (21%) had worked on-site “barely at all” and another 14% “on occasion”. Half of respondents (50%) were not working on-site at the time of the survey. Most (63%) respondents were happy with their current amount of on-site work, while there was a fairly even split of people who would like to be working on-site more (18%) or less (19%).

Staff continue to be concerned about their own health and safety in relation to working on-site during the pandemic: a quarter (25%) of respondents were very concerned about their own health, 40% were concerned and 33% unconcerned. By removing universal mitigations such as face coverings and social distancing, the University has, in effect, devolved health and safety decisions about how to conduct on-site activities during this latest phase of the pandemic to its departments. Concerningly, at the time of the survey 47% of respondents had not been provided with updated risk assessments for working on-site and a further 23% did not know if one had been provided. Similarly, over two-thirds (67%) of respondents reported that they had not had a meeting with a line man-

ager to discuss health and safety issues related to on-site working.

Free-text responses highlighted concerns about the impact of the new policy on clinically vulnerable colleagues; one said: “All of the onus has been put on clinically vulnerable individuals to have to advocate for themselves ... it’s producing a particular level of stress that means we are permanently trapped into thinking about our basic safety ... all the time.” Other comments expressed surprise at the change in policy on face coverings: “I really do not understand why the university could not bring itself to institute a clear and comprehensive mask mandate.” “‘Encouraging’ mask wearing as opposed to mandating it is absolutely not working.”

The apparently unexpected announcement of the change in policy meant that 58% of respondents felt that their views had not been taken into account with the new announcement: only 12% felt their views had been taken into account. Likewise, 45% of respondents felt that communication around the policy had been “unclear” or “very unclear”; 35% felt that communications were “clear” or “very clear.” At a more local level, 48% felt that Covid-19 health and safety rules were clear or very clear in the area of the University in which they work while 35% felt that the rules were “unclear” or “very unclear.”

Comments further highlighted the lack of clear communication and the unexpected announcement. For example: “From the reaction of departmental administrators ... I don’t feel they had been given enough notice to make preparations” and “Departments seem to be unclear on interpreting what the University’s guidance is requesting.” The disparity between academic staff—given the freedom to choose their location of work—and administrative staff, who may be more likely to be instructed to come to the office, was remarked. Several respondents noted that the call to return on-site undid many of the developments in working practices made during the pandemic and which have previously been acknowledged in the University’s “New Ways of Working.”

Whether or not cases will increase during this term as they did last year, the University needs to work harder to ensure that all staff are adequately consulted about changes to their working practices and to provide staff with the information and support to carry out their work safely during the pandemic. The pandemic has not ceased to be a risk to University staff, some more so than others, and the current mixture of responses across the University will inevitably mean that not all staff are receiving the highest possible protection that they deserve.

Oxford and Cambridge get into debt

G.R.EVANS

Why have Oxford and Cambridge run themselves into unprecedented levels of debt in the last two decades and was it wise? In December 2017 Oxford put itself in Bond debt of £750m, further extending that by £250m in January 2020. In June 2018 Cambridge issued £600m of new bonds in two tranches, tripling its previous Bond debt, with the second tranche of £300m ‘innovatively’ linked to the Consumer Prices Index.¹ *The Financial Times* of 3 July 2018 took a look at the issuing of Bonds by universities, setting it in the context of the ‘fall in direct government support for the sector’. Other universities have recently issued bonds too, in pursuit of capital to build better facilities to attract fee-paying students,² but that has not been the driver in the case of Oxford or Cambridge.

The Financial Times is right that Government funding has ‘fallen’. The capital element was actively reduced by HEFCE in the twenty-first century and the whole funding system changed radically with the ending of the old block grant with the *Higher Education and Research Act* of 2017. However, both the Office for Students and UKRI continue to provide ‘capital’ funding. The OfS offers this definition in connection with its own current consultation on the distribution of capital funding: ‘Capital expenditure means money used to acquire or maintain fixed assets, such as land, buildings and equipment’.³ The UKRI also explains its ‘capital’ funding system.⁴

Oxford and Cambridge have both become active in seeking capital for building.⁵ Oxford’s current *Strategic Plan* for 2018-23 speaks of the need for ‘significant capital investment’ (p.78). In the light of HEFCE’s revised policies it considers that:

‘Reductions in governmental funding for capital development require the University to review its approach to capital project investment and we shall work to develop a more proactive prioritised system of capital allocation (p.88).’⁶

Cambridge’s current Financial Statements speak of ‘the extensive capital programme of the last few years’ and a current ‘ambitious capital programme’.

The Vice-Chancellor spoke in her Oration in October 2018 on the resulting ‘strategy for growth’, with a ‘commitment to investing £1.5 billion’ in the estate over the next 15 years. She also stressed the reasons for spending the Bond capital on buildings rather than ‘people’. The Bond-issuing in Oxford and the policy leading to it have not been referred to Congregation for approval, though Council’s changes in Regulations relating to the University’s Bond were published in the *Gazette* of 11 January 2018 with an explanatory note.⁷

As it happens Cambridge’s constitution has required step by step referral to the Regent House of the stages in its own progress deeply into debt, with a resulting published record of the concerns raised. For example, Special Ordinance A (ix),1 (Grace of 10 May, 2018) records the Regent House’s grant of authority to the Council ‘to arrange external finance for income-generating projects up

to a total amount of £600m’. This was amended by Grace 12 of 29 July 2020 in the light of new plans for expansion of the University’s ‘non-operational’ estate.

It may be helpful to describe the sequences of events for comparison; Oxford’s Congregation turns out to have been minimally consulted compared to the Regent House.

Cambridge has been developing its landholdings in West and North-West Cambridge for nearly two decades now. It has reported on the way it intended to manage the financial risks in a series of *Reports* beginning in 1999-2000,⁸ each Discussed in the usual way by the Regent House. At first the ‘guiding principle’ was to release part of the site for ‘market housing’, partly to meet the University’s own needs for housing for its staff. The fourth of these Reports (March 2008) proposed laying down new ‘principles’ including that ‘negative cash flow in the early years of the development would be acceptable’.

The Board of Scrutiny had encouraged borrowing in its *Thirteenth Report* and in its *Fourteenth* in July 2009 it suggested that ‘conditions remain optimal for a large bond issue or Private Placement by the University’.⁹ Between these two *Reports* the Council responded in a Notice,¹⁰ and Report that it would seek the necessary amendment to Statute F,1 so as to ‘state a clear general power on the part of the University to deal with its assets and manage its investments without limitation under its Statutes’.¹¹ The necessary Grace was approved without Regent House challenge.

A *Green Paper* on the North West Cambridge Project in 2010 proposed to ensure that ‘any investment required by the University would be ring-fenced from academic budgets’.¹² That turned out to be a wise move. By 2011 what was now a ‘West and North West Cambridge Project Board’ was ‘developing a financial appraisal’ which suggested that ‘approximately £200m of funding will be required to cover the negative cash flows in the early stages of the project’, in fact, to cover ‘the interest cost of borrowing’ would create a ‘borrowing requirement of approximately £250m before the cash inflows from the project turn positive’. It was projected that ‘on the current projections borrowings would be repaid from project cash inflows after approximately 35 years’.¹³

The Report of the Council on external financing for the development of its land holdings in North West Cambridge and other building projects which gave these projections included a Capital Plan looking ‘forward fifteen years’, now to include ‘redevelopment of the New Museums Site and consequent development opportunities’, to be the subject of future Reports of the Council. There was to be a ‘Capital Fund’. ‘The University should be prepared to borrow to allow the Capital Plan to proceed, but on the understanding that the Fund should be able to cover ‘the costs of servicing and repaying the loans’.¹⁴ In 2012 the University took out a Bond for £350m, which required the Regent House to approve a Grace.¹⁵

The notion of seeking to make money from investment in a 'non-operational estate' was floated in the *Report* in May 2015 on *External finance for certain building projects, including North West Cambridge and the non-operational estate*.¹⁶ Non-operational building would be for commercial purposes not to support the University's charitable activities of teaching and research.

In the ensuing Discussion on 9 June 2015 a Council member spoke of his surprise 'to see reference to the Old Press/Mill Lane site in the current Report'. He 'had been under the impression that this development was going to wash its own face, in fact more than wash its own face', but exact information had not been available because it was 'commercially-sensitive'. On the Council he had noted that 'often nothing was ever Minuted in sufficient detail to pin-down any 90 degree turn (if not U-turn), but in my mind there is somewhat of a turn here as regards the Old Press/Mill Lane site'.

The Council published its response, arguing that this was a period of 'intense strategic capital development' which was 'necessary' at a time of 'loss of regular capital funding from government' and that the 'type of commercial developments referred to in the Report' were 'designed to maximize income from retail and non-research commercial uses'.¹⁷ The proposal was approved by Grace of 24 June without challenge.

Concerns were not quietened. A Topic of Concern Discussion on Phase I of the North-West Cambridge development was held in November 2015. A member of the Audit Group established to investigate the cost over-runs in the North West Cambridge project said it had 'identified systemic deficiencies in the project set-up, planning, leadership, oversight, risk management, and cost reporting'.¹⁸ Concerned to see that Council papers warned of a cost overrun of £50-80m a Council member had spoken to a member of the Syndicate appointed to oversee the project who had said 'Yes, it's just a total mess. I'm surprised you didn't sack us months ago.' He himself was concerned about the request in March 2015 for 'a further £300m borrowing facility', 'represented as being for development elsewhere, specifically for a shopping mall in the Old Press/Mill Lane site and a hotel on Trumpington Street'. He 'did not believe that the Old Schools had the managerial capacity to build and operate a shopping mall or a hotel'.¹⁹

The *Reporter* of 7 March, 2018 included a Notice on *Redevelopment of the Old Press / Mill Lane site* explaining that a Master Plan was being developed.²⁰ Platform Partnership Ltd. were appointed to supervise the development on a ten-year schedule to 2028.²¹ Meanwhile, in June 2018, Cambridge issued its two new £600m bonds, the second on a riskier basis.

In October 2020 a *Report* proposed the establishment of a Property Board 'to oversee the development, management and stewardship of the University's non operational estate', replacing the most recent of the series of internal bodies which had had responsibility for the building projects of the last two decades. It was presented as 'part of a set of changes to create a more effective governance structure for the oversight of the University's entire (operational and non operational) estate'.²²

The Discussion on 27 October 2020 was scathing. A speaker reviewed the failures of the previous bodies, the 'total mess' Syndicate and the West and North West Cambridge Estates Board, which this would replace. The

Chair of the Board of Scrutiny asked how it would be 'determined' that 'a particular property asset is "non operational"'. How, he asked, were the 'inevitable tensions between the stated commercial objectives of the Property Board and the wider charitable and educational mission of the University' to be dealt with? When the Grace was published a ballot was called and the proposal was approved without challenge by Grace 1 of 18 November 2020.

Oxford's constitution has required fewer automatic occasions for its Council to take decisions to Congregation as it has made its own progression into growing capital debt. The trajectory can be traced in part through the Corporate and subsequent Strategic Plans. In discussion towards the framing of Oxford's Corporate Plan for 2005-2010 it was felt that 'the principal objective of the University of Oxford Estates strategy' was to make 'the most effective use' of its existing 'capital assets' rather than to launch capital-heavy expansion. One of the resulting 'core strategies' was 'the consolidation of a substantial fund to support capital expenditure and the decision not to draw on it as such but to use the income which it generates to support borrowing'.²³

The *Strategic Plan* for 2008-13 noted that the University had 'experienced a period of rapid expansion of its building stock' but included the still modest intention to 'balance capital spending on refurbishing, renewing and replacing the existing estate with the delivery of new buildings to meet research and education needs' with an eye to 'institutional sustainability' (p.69).²⁴

In September 2015 Oxford took out a £200m European Investment Bank loan. This was signed on 8 July and announced in September in a Press Release which explained that it was to be used to fund 'current and new building projects throughout the University's Estate'. Congregation was not consulted or directly informed, as the *Oxford Magazine* pointed out.²⁵

When the University announced in December 2017 that it had raised £750m through a historic Bond issue, with a maturity of 100 years, the proceeds to be used for capital projects, Congregation's consent was not sought. The *Gazette* of 11 January 2018 published changes to Regulations. It was explained that 'the capital from the bond will initially be invested by Oxford University Endowment Management and overseen by Council's Investment Committee', but that 'Council has decided to charge the Finance Committee with the task of recommending to Council whether it is appropriate to draw down the capital for particular purposes'.

Looking back over their year in office in their demitting Oration in March 2018 the Proctors observed that 'the 'physical university' had 'grown by 25% in the last decade, and 43% of its buildings postdate 2000'. They thought this 'rapid growth needs some comment: no other area of the University has shown such vigorous and unconstrained growth'. The result was that 'the University is relatively flush when it comes to buildings, but runs its support services and academic divisions on the thinnest of margins, and some of them in deficit'. As for maintenance of the new buildings which was a 'cumulative addition to the University's liabilities is considerable given the rapid expansion of the estate'.

When David Prout became Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Planning and Resources, it was announced that he had been appointed to take forward ‘Oxford’s ambitious capital programme’. ‘Key projects’ were to:

‘range from much-needed housing for graduates and staff to a new humanities building, new laboratories for interdisciplinary bioscience and continued expansion of facilities for innovation and commercial enterprise.’²⁶

The Strategic Plan for 2018-23 accordingly took a far bolder line on capital expenditure:

‘A prioritised capital programme will be developed which will ensure that the existing estate is refurbished and renewed and that it is complemented with new buildings.’²⁷

This would involve substantial sums of money, ‘a capital investment programme in the estate and IT of at least £500 million by 2023’ which would accord ‘with the scale and ambition of the University’s strategic objectives’.²⁸

A 50:50 partnership between Oxford and Legal and General was announced in June 2019 ‘to develop homes for University staff and students, together with science and innovation districts in and around Oxford. Legal & General’s Future Cities business would provide up to £4bn of funding over the next ten years. The University was to retain ownership of the land and issue 60-year leases to Legal and General. The company’s ‘Future Cities’ business would fund the buildings and receive rent, but eventually hand the properties to the University. In an article for *Times Higher Education* on September 12, 2019, the Vice-Chancellor spoke positively of the way Oxford had ‘capitalised on market confidence in our education by taking out a hundred-year bond of £750m’ and by ‘forging a £4 billion joint venture with Legal and General’.

In January 2020 the £750m Bond was extended by £250m at 2% interest, partly to:

‘allow the University greater flexibility to pay off some of its previous bank borrowing more efficiently, over a longer period and giving us a lower interest rate’. (*Gazette*, 23 January 2020).

This was a Council decision and once more Congregation was not consulted.

Whether these debts will prove to have created acceptable risks in the long term time will tell but there seem to be two evident lessons. One is that both Oxford and Cambridge have found the cost consequences of their ambitious borrowing unfolding in ways not clearly foreseen. There has been progressive adjustment of objectives and of exposure to risks. The other is that although the Regent House has been insufficiently vigilant in calling a halt until recently it has at least had to be asked at each stage to approve a legislative act by Grace, and has had an opportunity to put its concerns on record. Congregation, by comparison, has been in no position whatsoever to question the policies or the debts it now has to live with.

G. R. EVANS

¹<https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/university-of-cambridge-raises-ps600-million-in-pioneering-bonds-issue>.

²For example UCL with a ‘Sustainability Bond’ of £300m in May 2021.

³Capital grants for financial year 2021-22 must be used for the purposes set out in paragraphs 77-83 of ‘Capital funding for financial year 2021-22 Allocations and invitation to bid’, 2 September 2021, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/e307ba03-1a11-4f3c-8d5c-3ed750afc499/outcomes-of-consultation-on-distribution-capital-funding-2021-22-final.pdf>

⁴<https://re.ukri.org/funding/our-funds-overview/>

⁵Some of their colleges are also building on their own account and on their own land.

⁶*Gazette* (Supplement (1), 28 November, 2012).

⁷These adjusted Council Regulations 1 of 2010 1.5 (2) concerning financial limits to authorisation of spending commitments. To the Capital Steering Group was added the Strategic Capital Steering Group.

⁸With details in the *Reporter* of 12 January 2011.

⁹*Reporter*, 15 July, 2009

¹⁰*Reporter*, 3 November 2008.

¹¹Report of the Council on amendments to Statute F, III (Property, buildings, and loans) and Statute J (University Press), *Reporter* 5 November, 2008.

¹²By the Green Paper, para. 117, *Reporter* 10 June, 2010.

¹³*Reporter*, 12 January, 2011.

¹⁴*Reporter*, 12 January, 2011.

¹⁵Grace 4 of 9 February 2011.

¹⁶*Reporter*, 21 May 2015.

¹⁷*Reporter*, 24 June 2015.

¹⁸In the *Reporter* of 13 April 2016, Council noted that it had approved recommendations of the second report of the Audit Group, published behind Raven (the equivalent of SSO) in 2016. 18

¹⁹*Reporter*, 11 November, 2015.

²⁰<https://platform.eu.com/old-press-mill-lane/>

²¹<https://platform.eu.com/projects>

²²*Reporter*, 7 October, 2020.

²³The Corporate Planning Statement towards the framing of a Corporate Plan for 2005-10 was published in *Gazette*, Supplement (2), 23 September 2004.

²⁴*Gazette*, Supplement (2), 21 May, 2008.

²⁵OM, Noughth Week, Michaelmas Term, 2015.

²⁶<https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2017-03-29-dr-david-prout-appointed-next-pro-vice-chancellor-planning-and-resources>

²⁷Strategic Plan 2018-23, Resources, Commitment 2.

²⁸Strategic Plan 2018-23, (Resources, Commitment 4, para. 27.

Safe Word

No prisoner ever fixed more keenly
on escape. I knew I'd make it through: scanned
timetables, packed bag, then discreetly
set the day to go. Despite all I'd planned
they stopped me buying my ticket at the station,
drove me home. Not that it mattered: I'd proved
I could do it, tasted salvation,
felt the ecstasy of freedom with a hue
on my lips, a mystic word forever,
enough to take me to a place in mind
where I'd resort and lose myself, never
to glance at the badlands left behind —
so it saved me, that gateway to liberty through
which I passed with my shibboleth, my safe word, "blue".

Escape Artistes

Pulling out of Oxford was long overdue,
the circus had been there so long; Slough
was calling, the Ringmaster said, remove
the tent and we'll go, quick as time will allow.
"No one asked me", said Hassan the lion,
"Nor me", said Gertrude the lorikeet,
the terriers urged acts of non-compliance
while Wilfred the donkey reclined in defeat.
Shorty the Juggler had fallen in love
with a publican's girl up Cowley Road,
he unlocked the animals, gave them a shove
and onto St Clements they overflowed.
"What a sight!", said the people, "It's perverse!
This flood of beasts — Noah's Ark in reverse!"

World Trade Center

(NYC, June 1999)

Looking down on aircraft flying below
my gaze, I marvelled at how wrong this was —
things inverted, scaled down, chaos made to go
in sworls, mandalas, squares — because

the brain *needs* disorder to see what's sifted
and coiffeured like a bokhara carpet.
As I watched, the pattern seemed encrypted,
waiting to spring a device left by an artist

long before this pattern was conceived;
became more detailed and more lucid, drew
me deeper, as if the design had perceived
a space for me within its infinite review,

and before I noticed, had me zapped,
staring at the image of myself, trapped.

DUNCAN WU

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Updates on Mis-governance

PETER OPPENHEIMER

Over the summer Sir Peter Lampl, well-known promoter of university admissions through his organ The Sutton Trust, himself made a nice admission, prominently reported in the *Daily Telegraph* on 8th August: too many people in Britain are now going to university. Too many, that is, for their own benefit, for the soundness of higher education and for the social and economic well-being of the country (or countries) as a whole.

Given Sir Peter's awareness and his sharp eye for educational merit and motivation, it is implausible to suppose that his comment was provoked merely by a handful of recently created or "fringe" institutions, rather than by the sector as a whole – including his own *alma mater*, the University of Oxford. The troubles here have been triggered entirely by ill-judged re-casting of the University's governance.

The North reforms two decades ago abolished the open, co-operative and grass-roots-based mechanisms by which University policies were until then conducted from day to day. The replacement is an authoritarian structure, with uncanny resemblances to the Russian and other absolutist states. Major decisions are taken in secret by members of a self-contained junta or oligarchy, mostly Pro-Vice-Chancellors and Division Heads, which also dominates the overloaded and basically theatrical University Council. The extra layer of bureaucracy constituted by the four Divisions – to one of which every faculty or academic department of the University belongs – serves to reinforce the disenfranchisement and subordination of the academic community. A specific aspect is that staffing levels in central administration are no longer subject to academic scrutiny. And sure enough, the aforementioned two decades have seen a trebling of the number of central admin personnel — from a little over 600 to something approaching 2,000. This body of people amounts effectively to a fifth Division, neatly analogous to the Fifth Column which captured Madrid for General Franco.

The size, shape and mind-set of the whole University have been duly affected. Not all but most of the changes are deleterious, exactly as one would expect when democracy gives way to authoritarianism.

Among the junta's trade-marks is conspicuous investment — spending money extravagantly on buildings, thereby also making work for the Estates people. The most obvious manifestations appear in the so-called Radcliffe Observatory Quarter, which is comparable with (albeit far smaller than) Mussolini's showcase suburb in Rome, the *Esposizione Universale Roma* (presciently abbreviated "EUR"). Other examples are located on the Headington Campus. And in 2017 the system seized an opportunity, after the discovery of asbestos in the Tinbergen Building at the eastern end of South Parks Road legitimised its demolition in favour of a new £200 million Life and Mind Building, to pride itself on "the largest building project ever undertaken by Oxford University".

Partly overlapping with the building frenzy is the process of growing the University in population and activities. Oxford City and surroundings need this, as they say

in America, like a hole in the head. It aggravates labour shortages, housing pressures (including higher prices), transport problems and environmental damage. For the apparatchiks to claim that it benefits the local economy is laughable. At the same time, the wider public is promised additional "performance spaces" and other "engagement" facilities, when these are already in over-supply and under-utilised. The Wellington Square propaganda machine understands that what should be defensible is the widening of scientific research activity, most notably in the medical sciences, which receive some two-thirds of the University's total annual research funding (now in excess of £600 million). But a plausible case is difficult to make when research — of all kinds — accounts for only a limited part of the population increase now underway.

In pre-empting the revenue required for its own overblown establishment, the central junta in effect told academic Divisions to make good the resulting shortfall by taking on more post-graduate students, not for research but for taught courses of one or sometimes two years' duration. Four or five such students each paying a fee in the £10-15,000 bracket balance the cost of one medium-ranked central official plus her office accommodation. Hopefully with a bit left over to add to teaching budgets. Altogether in the two decades since 2000, combined numbers of post-graduate (research plus non-research) students approximately doubled to 12,000, equalling or slightly exceeding the near-static undergraduate total.

But numbers are not the worst of Oxford's ills. In 2006 the University's then-still-influential assembly of Congregation decisively rejected an attempt by Vice-Chancellor Hood to impose on academic staff a system, whereby staff would have on a regular basis to account for their working lives and risk having their duties "re-balanced" — or in some cases eased into redundancy — by order if they failed to perform to the satisfaction of central officialdom. Over the subsequent decade a regime broadly resembling what had been voted down was introduced piecemeal under the heading of "performance management". The main difference appears to be that it operates by dangling positive incentives ("recognition of distinction", "merit awards" and the like) rather than through vague threats of punishment. It is of course divisive — that again is one of its main purposes — and enables the centre to encourage conduct which suits its convenience, such as seeking research grants and maximising publications, rather than teaching, examining or just being a good citizen.

Examination standards and proceedings is a sphere in which the ruling clique's neglect of its responsibilities has been particularly flagrant. It has simply closed its eyes to the issue, and allowed a tried and tested system of assessment to be wantonly destroyed by indifference. The fact that Cambridge has done likewise is not an impressive excuse — it merely indicates that the dilemma is systemic and neglect widespread. An amusing comparison with Covid-19 suggests itself. Viruses have long (always!) been a lurking danger. So too has the inconvenience for professors of giving serious time and effort to Final Examinations.

A calamity was unleashed under the first heading in Wuhan; under the second, in Whitehall, where successive decisions mean that most British students now have to incur significant long-term debt in exchange for obtaining higher education. To make the burden more tolerable, they surely deserve a “good” degree – 2:1 or better? Final Examinations have accordingly become a test more of memory than of reasoning or analytical ability. The proportion of Firsts awarded in Final Honour Schools in all subjects rose steadily from 20 percent in 2000 to 37 percent in 2019. In 2020, with COVID, it then jumped to 47 percent. Meanwhile the proportion of 2:1’s peaked in 2005 at 65 percent. Since then it has drifted downwards – but the combined proportion of Firsts and 2:1’s together has never again fallen below 91 percent, and in 2020 was levered up to 96 percent. What a farce!

At what point in the process was the ruling junta to be deemed in dereliction? Here we have an emerging issue of fundamental significance which it was incapable of tackling, and at the same time determined not to confess its incapacity by asking others — i.e. a body representative of the academic community — to tackle it. There could

scarcely be any better indication that the current structure of the University’s governance is unfit for purpose. Clear thinking is needed not only on the balance of academic duties, but on the relevance or otherwise of various wider issues, notably “access” (i.e. efforts to expand Oxford’s undergraduate intake from hitherto under-represented parts of society) and the solicitation of gifts from ethically questionable sources, not so much in the distant past but in the present day. It is, for instance, quite shocking that the University has failed even to express regret, let alone ponder the possibility of making financial redress, for having accepted millions from Mortimer Sackler for building the eponymous Sackler Library (opened in 2001). Anybody unaware of the background (which is Purdue Pharma and the addictive painkiller, Oxycontin), or wishing to know the full story, is referred to Patrick Radden Keefe, *Empire of Pain: the Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty*, (London, 2021).

How to initiate Congregation actions

How to trigger a debate or discussion in Congregation

It is open to any 20 or more members of Congregation to propose a resolution or topic for discussion at a meeting of Congregation; requests must be made in writing to the Registrar not later than noon on the 22nd day before the relevant meeting. Any 2 or more members of Congregation can submit an amendment to, or announce an intention to vote against, a resolution or a legislative proposal (*i.e.* a proposal to amend the statutes). Notice must be given to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 8th day before the meeting.

Questions and replies

Any 2 or more members of Congregation may ask a question in Congregation about any matter concerning the policy or the administration of the University. Requests must be submitted to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 18th day before the Congregation meeting at which it is to be asked. The question and the reply (drafted by Council) will be published in *Gazette* in the week prior to the relevant meeting. The answer is also formally read out at the meeting. Supplementary questions are allowed.

Postal votes

Attendance at meetings of Congregation tends to be low. Postal voting can potentially allow opinion to be easily accessed more widely across Congregation membership. Congregation can trigger a postal vote after a debate (but not after a discussion or a question and reply where no vote is taken). 25 or more members of Congregation have to be present (“on the floor”) at the relevant debate. The request must be made by 4pm on the 6th day after the debate, signed by 50 members of Congregation, in writing to the Registrar. Council can also decide to hold a postal ballot, by the same deadline.

Flysheets

To generate a flysheet for publication with the *Gazette*, the camera-ready copy (2 sides maximum) should be submitted with at least 10 signatures on an indemnity form (obtainable from the Registrar) by 10am on the Monday in the week in which publication is desired.

Regulations governing the conduct of business in Congregation can be found at: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/529-122.shtml>

Items placed on the agenda for Congregation are published in the *Gazette*.

The Congregation website is at: www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation.

Advice on Congregation procedures is available from the Council Secretariat on request (email: congregation.meeting@admin.ox.ac.uk).

Linguistic Bias in Academic Publishing (and why expert academic editing can help level the field)

LOUISE CHAPMAN AND CONSTANTINE SANDIS

It's no secret that the peer review process can be biased. Over the past several decades, there has been growing awareness of peer review bias and its effects on the careers of scholars. Efforts have been made to address bias, but it may be even more pervasive than realised.

Peer review is a process used by academic publishers to evaluate author submissions. More broadly, it can be applied by academic hiring, funding, and conference committees to evaluate applicants. In journal peer review, experts from a particular discipline are invited to review the work of colleagues in the field. Review lends credibility to new research. It also helps communicate new findings to the broader academic community, policymakers, and practitioners. Bias in peer review, then, can have a significant impact on academic career advancement and access to other job opportunities.

Established bias in academic publishing

In 2001, *Behavioral Ecology* journal introduced a double blind (when the identity of both author and reviewer is hidden) process of peer review. By 2008, a study¹ found a small but important increase in the proportion of female first-authored papers published by the journal since the implementation of double blind review. The evidence thus established a gender bias within the peer review process.

Although the peer review process was modified to eliminate unconscious bias, gender bias in academic publishing is hardly limited to authorship. For example, a 2017 article² published in *Nature* pointed out that journals generally invite too few women to serve as peer reviewers. Peer review can be an important part of career building in that close scrutiny of other manuscripts helps researchers develop their own writing skills and expertise. It enables them to build networks with other scholars, editors, and leaders in their field. These contacts can be especially important in the early years of an academic career.

Worse, bias in authorship and peer review can accumulate over time. For instance, women are rarely appointed to prestigious editorial positions.³ Work as a journal editor enhances the profile of a scholar within their research community. Editors develop close familiarity with ongoing research in the field at large, which can provide new ideas for a scholar's own research. Editorial positions are also powerful in that they can shape the culture of academic publishing and exert a major influence over the development of disciplines.

Evidence of linguistic bias in peer review

Similar dynamics could be playing out in terms of language. This is because scientific research and academic exchange are dominated by English. Nearly all high impact, international journals publish in English, particularly for the natural sciences.⁴ While it can be difficult to measure the quality of work under review regardless of language fluency, at least one recent paper⁵ has found concrete preliminary evidence of linguistic bias. In a randomized control study, a group of scholars was asked to judge the scientific quality of several abstracts with identical scientific content. Each abstract was rendered in two versions: one version was written in international academic English, while the other was not (but remained just as comprehensible). The findings suggest that scholars rate abstracts written in international academic English as having higher scientific quality than those that are not. In other words, reviewers perceived scholarship written by non-Anglophone scientists as lower in quality.

The study, which claims to provide the first experimental evidence for linguistic bias in academic publishing, speaks to dynamics similar to those for gender bias. Unlike with gender, however, perceptions about the quality or fluency of language can be highly subjective. Here, it is worth bearing in mind that peer reviewers have no special training or expertise in the use of English. International academic English is simply language that conforms to what a reviewer perceives is 'good' or 'native-like'⁶ English. Such writing is not necessarily good by the standards of prose or composition. It merely reflects what editors and reviewers are accustomed to reading.

Linguistic bias and scholarship

But linguistic bias goes further to encompass difficulties that could make publication for non-Anglophones less likely. In a review of the additional burdens imposed on non-Anglophone scholars from around the globe, one paper⁷ cites academics in Hong Kong feeling hampered by 'less rich vocabulary', and 'less facility in expression'; problems with word choice and syntax that impede meaning; possible shortcomings in the understanding of English modality that could cause Slovak authors to inappropriately qualify their claims; and other language issues that weaken the effectiveness of an argument.

An increased likelihood of rejection could fuel a sense of inadequacy, leading non-Anglophone scholars to see publication in English as overly difficult. They may then take longer to search for and review sources, conduct re-

search, and write manuscripts. Overall, this amounts to a larger investment of time and effort for each manuscript. Non-Anglophone scholars may find themselves in a situation similar to that of women, with fewer opportunities for advancement at critical points in their careers. Even if not actually disadvantaged in publication, non-Anglophone scholars may perceive themselves as such. In fact, research⁸ suggests this attitude is widespread.

Overcoming negative perceptions with academic editing

There are no easy solutions for the impacts of linguistic bias on perception. One pragmatic way to address bias in peer review is through departmental funding for professional academic editing, which is already a practice at many universities in non-Anglophone countries. Professional academic editing ensures that a paper will make a more positive first impression on readers. Working line by line, a professional academic editor can elevate the register and style of a manuscript so that it meets the expectations of peer reviewers and journal editors about how academic writing should look. A skilled academic editor can go beyond language mechanics to flag issues that impede meaning, helping strengthen an argument before the content is subject to peer review.

Overcoming bias, whether real or perceived, can be vital for confidence. Paper submission to English-language journals or conferences can be daunting for non-Anglophone scholars, especially early in their careers. Yet publication in English can also determine a scholar's access to opportunity. Professional editing, such as that provided by Lex Academic, can help level the playing field, putting non-Anglophone researchers on equal footing (at least) with their Anglophone counterparts within the peer review process. In turn, participation in the submission process can confer benefits beyond publication. Ultimately, these benefits offer non-Anglophone scholars more agency within the highly competitive world of academic publishing.

Louise Chapman and Constantine Sandis are the founders of Lex Academic. Specialising in the humanities and social sciences, Lex Academic seeks to level the playing field for international researchers with outstanding proofreading, copy-editing, and translation.

¹http://blogs.nature.com/peer-to-peer/2008/01/doubleblind_peer_review_reveal.html

²<https://www.nature.com/articles/541455a>

³<https://europepmc.org/article/med/33523967>

⁴<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2010.01656.x>

⁵<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1475158520301685>

⁶<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1475158520301685>

⁷<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2010.01656.x>

⁸<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2010.01656.x>

In the Long Grass of a Farm

A ruffled fox, or aristocratic rake,
Slips through long grass. Beside a demirep cat,
Smug and snug and flickeringly awake,
Swinging the lead not rounding up King Rat,

A contraption loses its identity
In dislocated shaft or fallen jaw,
Its proud red fashionable livery
Illegible, its knack and bite no more.

The practical and forceful sheets of metal,
The famous screws and entrails cringe with rust.
Over it there nods a singular nettle.
No fuel will be inspired now to combust.

The Industrial Revolution's rote and blade,
Romantic nature's countering place and charm
And reclamation: so much is displayed
As fragments in the long grass of a farm.

KIERON WINN

Kieron Winn's first collection of poetry, *The Mortal Man*, was published in 2015: 'superb collection' (*Agenda*); 'the level of craft in these poems is a delight' (Clive James). Recent poems have appeared in *The London Magazine*, *New Statesman*, *The Spectator* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. www.kieronwinn.com

The battle of Britain revisited

A.D.HARVEY

Of all history specializations Military History (my Special Subject as an undergraduate in the 1960s) is perhaps the one that has been least successful in escaping from the one-sidedness and lack of context of accounts written soon after the event. Although in recent years figures for the losses of the Royal Air Force and the *Luftwaffe* in the Battle of Britain have been revised upwards — RAF Fighter Command are now thought to have lost not 915 but 1023 aircraft and the *Luftwaffe* not 1733 but 1887 — the RAF's relative advantage looks much the same. If however one factors in the losses of RAF Bomber Command and Coastal Command in the course of raids on invasion ports, aerodromes, communications centres and other continental targets (including retaliatory raids on Berlin) in the same period — raids that were as much part of the Battle of Britain campaign as the air defence of southern England — the 1549 British aircraft lost in action to Germany's 1887 suggest a rather different picture.

The *Luftwaffe* outnumbered the RAF almost two to one and these losses represent 64.5 per cent of RAF front line strength stationed in Britain on 1 August 1940, the day of Hitler's directive to the *Luftwaffe* to, 'overpower the English air force with all the forces at its command, in the shortest possible time,' as compared to 45 per cent of *Luftwaffe* combat aircraft. (Omitted from this calculation are the *Luftwaffe*'s 375 transport aircraft, which had no real counterpart in the RAF at that stage of the war.) The RAF may have won a victory in preventing the *Luftwaffe* gaining mastery of the air over southern England preparatory to a planned invasion but the statistics make it look very much like a Pyrrhic Victory.

Leaving aside the question of the German invasion that was thwarted (and which Hitler may not have seriously intended) the real significance of the Battle of Britain is its effect on the *Luftwaffe* later in the Second World War. The *Luftwaffe* never quite recovered from the loss of 2542 aircrew killed over southern England and the 925 taken prisoner. At its peak in 1944 the *Luftwaffe* had a front line strength less than 40 per cent greater than in August 1940: the RAF, despite its concentration on building up a huge fleet of four-engined bombers, had a 280 per cent increase in front line strength by 1944. RAF aircrew were also better trained, pilots being sent to combat units with far more flying hours behind them than was the case with German pilots. Inexperienced aircrew were a significant factor in the poor results obtained in both the "Little Blitz" raids on London and the air battles over Germany against American bomber formations and their escorts early in 1944. Partly this was the result of a failure of forward planning by the *Luftwaffe*: more than half of British aircraft production for the RAF in 1939 had been of training aircraft, and more than a third even in 1941; the corresponding figures for Germany were little more than one in ten in 1939 and one in twelve in 1941.

Despite the lessons of the First World War, Germany embarked on its second bid for European hegemony without any realistic ideas regarding the problem of sustaining

a prolonged war on even a single front. The economy was already under strain when Poland was invaded in September 1939, particularly with regard to transportation: the disruption caused by the diversion of Rhine barges to the invasion ports in September 1940 (and the wrecking of more than 12 per cent of them by British bombing) may have been a bigger set-back to the German war economy than the effect of German bombing on the British war economy. Building up the strength of the *Luftwaffe* to compete numerically with the RAF (and USAAF and Soviet VVS) later in the war would have necessitated a massive re-allocation of resources that nobody in the *Luftwaffe* was able to envisage. After the Battle of Britain replacing combat losses within existing front line units was an obvious priority, and the shortage of trained personnel resulting from the air fighting over southern England seems to have distracted attention from the equally pressing need to build new combat formations.

Midland and South Western

*on listening to the reconstruction of Elgar's third
symphony; for Armand D'Angour*

Midland and South Western ... A bridge
here spanning nothing, here a couple
of pines out of place, here overgrown blue

bricks untrodden for decades, a fragment
here perhaps of spiked railing missed
by scrapmen in the brambles, might be

these scattered strands of sound, gathered
and read into harmony sixty and more
years beyond the grave. Or again

this sketchy allegretto of longing for
faded graciousness remoter still, might
mime the train's remembered beat, three

dull maroon coaches spuffling through
an April landscape so empty now
you would need to know exactly

what you were looking for if you were
to trace their course. At one end
always a mistle-thrush loud in the crown

of an old acacia, defying dreariness
of an outworn settlement; wild garlic
scenting the hanging woods at the other,

where from the road to Birdlip you see
in brittle spring the shadowy hills
I can hear still in his liminal defiance

and elegy that hangs desultory on
the wind in drifts of music conjured
from loss. Whether out of Cotswold,

Malvern, or a Wessex valley lush with
jack-by-the-hedge and lords-and-ladies,
soon enough such images perish, all

sudden remembered shafts of insight
into regions beyond the quotidian,
mine or others', perish. Here, green

pungency of budding larch, there,
reflected in wet Sunday slate after
hay-harvest, anemones, ghostly;

here, rose-hips glowing like angry
late-year sunset, there, that one,
half laughing, unwithholding, from

beyond those humped bracken hills,
the hidden heat of her amid clammy
fogs of a winter river: all these,

all anyone might keep by to recall
when dying, these die with us too.
Ask perhaps nothing more, celebrate

only that these were: wisps of song
or knowledge, blown past as it might be
twirls of cloud in a rough sky that endures

when we and all our visions are one with
the forgotten indigo of the nameboards
for Foss Cross, Chedworth and Withington.

Michael Wolgemut

(by Dürer, Deutsches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg)

Malachite: though perhaps merely
conventional ground, might appear
in context — as if marjoram-green

for late summer, the blackbird
long fallen silent — to assert,
despite itself, virid age. The nose,

verging on spiky, should portend
mortality; but the grey eyes' focus
is resolute, the strands of hair

snaking from under the cap, still far
from grey. The master's own master,
elder craftsman of Nuremberg,

keeps his wits about him, loved
evidently, respected for sure
by the greater, but not obviously

happier man, who, depicting
himself at last in draggled
nakedness, cuts beside this

a hangdog figure: youth's glory
and boast palpably withered
before the onslaught of something

unspoken. But here Wolgemut,
steadfast, living up to his name,
stares down the worst, proud, we may guess,

to have earned such celebration: here,
he seems to say, is my city, this
unflinching gaze bespeaks who I am.

NICOLAS JACOBS

Nicolas Jacobs, by origin a Wessex man, born in the New Forest, but now living in North Wales, is a dedicated though not always a very effective gardener. Educated at Christ Church and having for many years taught mediaeval English at Jesus, he has, beside academic publications in English, French and Welsh, published poetry in a number of small magazines over the past fifty years. These include *New Measure*, *Delta*, *English*, *Swansea Review*, *Agenda*, *London Magazine*, *Oxford Magazine*, *Archipelago* and, most recently, *PN Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review* and *Raceme*.

REVIEWS

An artificial friend

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* ((Faber and Faber Ltd., 2021).



Klara is a robot who is bought to look after a girl called Josie. She has a high level of intelligence, and compares with Adam in Ian McEwan's *Machines like me and people like you* (reviewed in *Oxford Magazine*, No. 422). Both of these novels occupy alternative worlds, in which Joseph Heller has written *Catch 18* and technology has evolved sufficiently to create androids who could be mistaken for the real thing. But Klara seems not to have been as comprehensively programmed as McEwan's Adam. It has been said that the trouble with trying to speak with machines powered by artificial intelligence is that they are very poor at conversation. Klara is better than most, but her conversation and prose-style is somewhat stilted, and it certainly is not quick and racy. One is reminded, to a degree, of the strained discourse of Mr. Spock in *Star Trek*. Readers who have not read *Klara and the Sun* might be advised to stop here, since it will spoil the experience not to be surprised and kept guessing.

It becomes apparent towards the end that Josie's mother, Chrissie Arthur, has bought Klara so that if Josie dies Josie's character and behaviour can be replicated in the robot, thus prolonging her existence after death. She already tried something along these lines with a daughter called Sal, but the experiment failed. The Frankenstein-like figure producing the robot who will take on board Klara's character and memories is Henry Capaldi. Josie is described as visiting him for a 'portrait', but it is considerably more than a portrait which is being constructed. It seems to challenge the traditional and 'sentimental' view of human individuality, but many readers at this point will think that Capaldi is a mad, deluded scientist.

'Our generation still carry the old feelings. A part of us refuses to let go. The part wants to keep believing there's something unreachable inside each of us. Something that's unique and won't transfer. But there's nothing like that, we know that now.' (p. 210)

Early on in Klara's narration, when she is asked by Chrissie to imitate Josie's walk, we think nothing of it, but at the very end the Manager of the store where Klara was sold confesses that she was worried about this

and suspected something. We have a faint suspicion, possibly, of Chrissie's plan when Klara and she go on a trip together to Morgan's Falls and she asks the robot to behave like her daughter: "I want you to be Josie. Just for a little while." (pp. 103-4).

Like McEwan's Charlie Friend, who speaks of projecting 'a human quality' onto a machine (p. 77), Ishiguro is intrigued by how close a robot can come to imitating a human being. Klara retains more robotic features than McEwan's Adam, but the people she meets treat her as something like a person, and she has emotions. There are elements missing though, and on the penultimate page Klara says to her Manager that there was something special which was not just inside Josie and could not be replicated with the best will in the world: 'It was inside those who loved her.' This conversation takes place in a scrap-yard to which Klara has been consigned as superfluous to requirements. There is less explicit pathos here than in the 'death' of McEwan's Adam.

There is another theme running alongside the central fantasy: that in this imagined society children's intelligence can be up-graded by a risky special operation. Josie has had it, but her friend Dick hasn't. He is finding it hard to progress even though he has some natural talents.

Where Ishiguro is very good is in his attempt to reproduce what a view of the world might be like from the perspective of someone with artificial rather than human intelligence. Often, under stress, Klara's perception comes via grids and boxes, and sometimes appearances have to be processed in a much more laborious way than ordinary human perception. Here is Klara in a crowd, attempting to make sense of it all;

'But now I was in their midst, their figures became more simplified, as if constructed out of cones and cylinders made from smooth card. Their clothes, for instance, were devoid of the usual creases and folds, and even their faces under the sunlight appeared to have been created by cleverly placing flat surfaces into complex arrangements to create a sense of contouring.' (p. 235)

I believe Ishiguro is playing an elaborate academic joke here, since there is surely a reference to what Cézanne said to Emile Bernard about visible reality: 'Everything in nature is modelled on the sphere, the cone and the cylinder.' This comment is in *Cézanne by himself*, edited by Richard Kendall (1988) (p. 299). Funnily enough though Cézanne's paintings are not based on this observation. Howard Hodgkin

played an elaborate academic joke when he produced a painting made up of a fuzzy cylinder, sphere and cone: *The Cylinder, The Sphere, The Cone* (1978-84) (The Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh – you can see it on the internet). Cézanne did not put onto his canvases what the camera and vulgar observation would record but something abstracted and refracted. His example inspired the experiments of dissolution and reconstitution which Cubism went in for, although he was not a Cubist himself exactly.

Later in Klara's memory the clouds are 'tiny funnel and pyramids – each looking a though drawn in sharp pencil lines – blowing swiftly across the sky' (p. 284), and later still 'small cylinders and pyramids flying by in the wind.' (p. 301). After writing this I read Anna Orhanen's interview (24 February) with Ishiguro, in which he mentions these passages: 'If we're drawing analogies with art movements here, these passages are probably more "cubist" than "surreal" — though this is beginning to sound rather pretentious!' Nice to have one's suspicions confirmed by the author. Hope that doesn't mean I am pretentious. All this leads to the thought, though, as to whether Klara is seeing as Cézanne did.

The images of the sun reflected on seven glass sheets in the barn are very like some of Cézanne's still-lives, where outlines are evanescent and indefinite, provisional even, as if the objects are at once solid not solid: 'as I looked at them collectively, the effect was of a single face, but with a variety of outlines and emotions.' (p. 278) Klara's perceptions throughout are detailed and concentrated; she notices with a heightened intensity the patterns and shapes formed by sunlight. These are abnormal, since for ordinary people perception and consciousness are devices not for taking appearance and reality on board but filtering it out. It's only exceptional people, such as Virginia Woolf, who really register what is in front of them. This passage from *The Waves* is a typical example:

'The sun fell in sharp wedges inside the room. Whatever the light touched became dowered with a fanatical existence. A plate was like a white lake. A knife looked like a dagger of ice. Suddenly tumblers revealed themselves upheld by streaks of light. Tables and chairs rose to the surface as if they had been sunk under water and rose, filmed with red, orange, purple like the bloom on the skin of ripe fruit. The veins on the glaze of the china, the grain of the wood, the fibres of the matting became

more and more finely engraved. Everything was without shadow. A jar was so green that the eye seemed sucked up through a funnel by its intensity and stuck to it like a limpet. Then shapes took on mass and edge. Here was the boss of a chair; here the bulk of a cupboard. And as the light increased, flocks of shadow were driven before it and conglomerated and hung in many-pleated folds in the background.'

There are lots of other passages like this in the novel. Another is from *To the Light-house*, describing Lily Briscoe, who is a kind of Post-Impressionist, at work:

'The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall staring white. She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and staring white, since she saw them like that, fashionable though it was, since Mrs. Pounceforte's visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semi-transparent. Then beneath the colour was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked.'

As more and more of us are enslaved to the wretched small screens the perceptive faculty is being increasingly atrophied. What was it Woolf's mentor Walter Pater said in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*?

'In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike.'

Robots such as Adam and Klara have to have had a degree of pre-programming, but in continuing to accumulate information they have to be more attentive and perceptive than human beings who can just muddle along. There is an alarming moment when Klara sees 'a creature with numerous limbs and eyes':

'And then even as I watched, a crack appeared down its center. As it divided itself, I realized it had been, all along, two separate people – a runner and a dog walk woman – moving in opposite directions who for an instant happened to be passing one another' (p. 217).

This is an excellent account of what it might be like if one had been blind all one's life, and suddenly received the challenging and disconcerting gift of sight. This is what robotic intelligence might be like.

Because the novel is first-person (so to speak) narrative we allow something like human perception to be taking place. *Machines like us* is different, told from the point of view of Adam's owner, hence more sceptical:

'I had little idea of what passed along my own optic nerve, or where it went next, or how these pulses became an encompassing self-evident visual reality, or what was doing my seeing for me. Only me. Whatever the process was, it had the trick of seeming

beyond explanation, of creating and sustaining an illuminated part of the one thing in the world we knew for sure – our own experience. It was hard to believe that Adam possessed something like that. Easier to believe that he saw in the way a camera does, or the way a microphone is said to listen. There was no one there.' (pp. 128-9)

Klara is powered by the sun, and she assumes she has a special relationship with the sun, and can placate it by vandalising a polluting machine by sacrificing some of her vital fluid. She believes the sun retires to a neighbouring barn at night, and visits the barn to seek guidance and inspiration.

This novel might seem very fanciful, but sometimes it seems we are almost within sight of the dystopian nightmare of plausible and dominant machines. The avatar of vocaloid, Hatsune Miku, has a repertoire of 100,000 songs, and performed some of them 'live' (we need those inverted commas) at the Saitama Super Arena in 2009. She's even more artificial than Justin Bieber. In November 2018 she married the Japanese fan Akihiko Kondo. 'Here's metal more attractive' he might have said. Alexa eat your heart out! Her name means 'the first sound of the future': she sings not of past, or passing but what's to come.

'Klara and the Sun gets off to a slow and even laboured start, but it's worth sticking with, and towards the end one is very intrigued to see what will happen. And as with McEwan's Adam it becomes quite difficult, both for readers and characters in the novel, to register that Klara is not somehow a human being. One would have this feeling even more seeing a film version, because Klara would be played by a human actress. I suppose that will happen before long.'

When the cultural history of our time is written in the distant future scholars and historians will indicate that in the early years of this century novelists and neurologists were grappling with the problem of consciousness even more concentratedly than before. *The London Review of Books* for 22 April has review by Riva Galchen of three books on the brain, by Matthew Cobb, Jack Price and David Eagleman: 'A mystery to itself'. It concludes: 'the Split brain, as far as we can tell, doesn't know when it's blanketing over the gaps. And neither do we.' Eagleman is also reviewed in *TLS* (30 April). Mark Solms, who is involved with neuropsychanalysis, has recently published *The Source of Consciousness*. McEwan notes in 'Acknowledgments' 'a long conversation' with Demis Hassabis, associated with the DeepMind project.

BERNARD RICHARDS

Glyndebourne sunshine

Luisa Miller, Glyndebourne,
25 August 2021



There are few better scenes than a picnic on the lawn in the sunshine at Glyndebourne (the sunshine never being a given!), and with the prospect of a new production for this season to look forward to. In fact, this was the first time that Verdi's 'Luisa Miller' had ever been staged at Glyndebourne, so there was a real sense of anticipation. Temperature testing on arrival and wearing masks in the auditorium are the new 'norm', yet it was nice to see a fuller theatre than on our 'reduced capacity' visit earlier in the season.

The opera was first performed in Naples in 1849, and is based on Schiller's play "Intrigue and Love". The eponymous heroine, the daughter of an old soldier, falls in love with 'Carlo', who is actually Rodolpho, the son of the local count. This is an impossible match as the count wants his son to marry a rich widow, Federica, and Luisa's father suspects Rodolpho of playing with his daughter's affections. However, he wants Luisa to choose her husband, and will not help the count's secretary, Wurm, press his suit with Luisa. The count has Luisa's father thrown into gaol, and Wurm persuades Luisa that the only way to save his life is to write a letter saying she never loved Rodolpho only Wurm, a letter which is then passed to Rodolpho. He takes this at face value, and having taken poison himself, poisons Luisa for her 'treachery'. Only when they are both dying does it become apparent that they were truly in love. With his last breath, Rodolpho kills the evil Wurm for his perfidy.

Whilst musically Christof Loy's production was a very good one, I need to say up front that I really did not like the set. It was very Spartan with few props: a desk on one side of the stage, a crucifix on the wall, with white walls, white back drop, bright (white) lighting; the 'whiteness' accentuated by the black, white and grey nature of the costumes (the chorus, such as it was, much reduced in number, was all in black). The opening scene had some colour in it: flowers strewn around Luisa's sleeping body on her birthday, yet the significance of this did not materialise until Act 3 when Luisa sings "the tomb is a scattered bed of

flowers, in which the righteous sleep" (since she will end up in the tomb despite having done nothing wrong). The sleep/death motif was further reinforced by having Luisa wear a nightdress for Act III. Other clues as to Luisa's fate were her being centre stage whilst, in the distance, the huntsmen sing "we have trapped our prey", underlining Luisa as a victim.

The crucifix is taken down from the wall twice: once in the first act by Luisa, when it is waved at the count and Wurm (yet struck

me as a scene from a second rate vampire movie rather than railing against the injustice of her fate), and once in the third act by Rodolpho, when cursing Providence for his misfortunes (let's put aside that the naive young innocent has been jumping to conclusions). He then throws it theatrically to the ground, where, unfortunately for the dramatic crescendo, it bounces....Am not sure how well the scene would have sat with the nineteenth century church and censors, although I suspect the latter were far more focused on political rather than religious criticism.

Armenian Mane Galoyan was very good as Luisa, bringing out her straightforward decent feelings: her love for both Rodolpho and her father came out clearly, and from her dealings with Wurm we saw that she was not naturally duplicitous. She received enthusiastic applause at the final curtain. I warmed more to tenor Ivan Magri's Rodolpho as the performance wore on: it is in the second half that he is given the arias to show what he can do. I really enjoyed Vladislav Sulimsky's Miller: the baritone brought a lovely rich sound to the part of Luisa's father, and his despair and pleading with his daughter not to kill herself was very moving. After Luisa, he had the longest ovation at the end. I liked

the tone of bass Evgeny Stavinsky's Count, and the development of his character (autocratic initially, then bewilderment that his son should not do as he wished before ultimate incomprehension). Mezzo Nadezhda Karyazina's Federica had a deep and rich almost contralto voice at times and was sung most competently, although the characterisation was a little less effective: whilst credible as someone who had loved Rodolpho for a long time, having been spurned, she did not come across as a monster who found pleasure in depriving others of happiness.

In many ways, the real star of the show was the Jonathon Bloxham conducted London Philharmonic Orchestra. The balance between orchestra and singers was excellent as was the tempo. The strings were particularly evident and impressive.

My favourite scene was the ensemble singing of the Count, Wurm, Federica and Rodolpho, a technique Verdi uses so memorably in some of his later operas (eg 'Rigoletto'). Not only is there the harmonious interaction of the different voice parts, we, the audience, are aware of the different perspectives of the characters about what is actually going on even as they all sing together.

In summary, I liked the music but not the set. There are other Verdi operas which are

better known (and higher in my affections) but I was pleased to see the production and it was an enjoyable evening. Kobbe's comment about where 'Luisa Miller' sits amongst Verdi's works may well be pertinent, namely as marking the end of the first phase of his development, with the next phase seeing him established as "a respected and in-demand composer". However, it would be unfair to say that 'Luisa Miller' is interesting only in the historical context of Verdi's career, it is a much better and more enjoyable opera than that. Yet perhaps the real success of this performance was seeing it played out to a (nearly) full opera house.

TIM WICKENS

The *Oxford Magazine* is edited by

**Tim Horder
&
Ben Bollig**

The *Magazine* normally appears in Noughth, Second, Fifth and Eighth Weeks each Term. Submissions (preferably by e-mail to: tim.horder@dpag.ox.ac.uk, benjamin.bollig@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk) should be received by the Wednesday of the previous week.

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Oxford Magazine

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*Subscriptions normally run from
September for a full academic year,
but can be started at any time.*

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